



# State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

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## THE STATE OF EDUCATION

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Memorial Union

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Thank you, Bette, for that kind introduction. I also would like to recognize and thank the Sun Prairie Concert Choir, under the direction of Mary Schmidt. The Sun Prairie community and Superintendent Tim Culver have much to be proud of.

And thank you to the excellent staff at the Department of Public Instruction, the CESAs, WEAC and WFT, our institutions of higher education, and the many individuals and organizations in this state who support education. I want to thank all of you for the tremendous commitment you demonstrate in serving the children and public schools and libraries of Wisconsin.

Thank you school district administrators, who have joined us here today for our annual fall conference. As superintendents, it is your job, every day, to bring people together around the shared vision of quality education.

I am honored to serve as your state superintendent, and it is a privilege to report to the people of Wisconsin on the state of education and to issue a call for action to local communities to pledge to a New Wisconsin Promise that ensures a future of quality education for all the children of our great state. A New Wisconsin Promise that ensures quality education for economic growth. A New Wisconsin Promise that calls upon us to recommit to the conservation of public education as a democratic ideal.

Wisconsin has a proud history of educational leadership and innovation. From our country's first kindergarten, to nation-leading performance on college admission tests, to a truly world-class system of higher education and public libraries, our state has always prided itself on our educational system. The people of Wisconsin have long understood the importance of public education in a strong economy and have recognized the interdependence of strong public schools and libraries and healthy, productive communities.

The quality of life we have in Wisconsin and who we are today is a direct result of the investment made in us as children. Raising a family in Wisconsin has been built upon the promise of a public education that provided the chance to get ahead if you worked hard, did well in school, and were a responsible member of your community.

But, we are at a crossroads, and that promise will only stay alive for this generation of Wisconsin children and families if education truly prepares them for the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. Education must be the foundation for any successful economic growth plan, and the immediate as well as long-term economic security of our state will be determined by our success in developing PK-16, business, and community partnerships that support and have a shared responsibility for education and workforce development.

Governor Doyle's plan for revitalizing Wisconsin's economy through creating knowledge-based jobs will take new approaches to how we educate our children and young people, and it will take an investment in PK-16 educational opportunity for all citizens. The key strategies for PK-12 education in the economic growth and development of Wisconsin must be, No. 1, to close the gap in achievement that exists in our state between economically disadvantaged children, children of color, and their peers. To close the gap, we must:

- ensure quality teachers in every classroom and strong leadership in every school;
- improve student achievement with a focus on reading and a balanced literacy standard that has all students reading at grade level;
- invest in early learning opportunities through the 4-year-old kindergarten, Preschool to Grade 5, and SAGE class-size reduction programs;
- increase parental and community involvement in our schools and libraries to address teenage literacy, dropouts, and truancy;
- provide before- and after-school programs and health and nutrition programs that bring resources together to support families;
- and we must provide career and technical education as a comprehensive strategy to involve students in becoming active citizens by better understanding their role in the family, society, and world of work.

Secondly, for PK-12 education to support economic growth, we must increase the high school graduation rate and provide greater access to allow more students to attend technical college and four-year institutions.

Third, PK-12 education can promote Wisconsin's economic growth by working collaboratively with the Wisconsin Technical College System, UW System, and the private colleges and universities of Wisconsin in a seamless PK-16 educational system at both the state and regional levels. Students must have access to life-long educational, technical, and workforce development opportunities.

And, fourth, for economic growth, we need good education and workforce development policy and programming. We must develop a political alliance among business, education, and labor that supports and has shared responsibility for the common goal of workforce development and education for employment in our state. The youth options and youth apprenticeship programs are critical to our success.

We will only prevail in this alliance if we can bring people together, and we don't keep fighting the same partisan wars. Our common ground is the need for economic growth, and by focusing on this common ground, business, labor, and education can reach the higher ground of finding solutions to school finance and taxation.

The Governor's Task Force on Educational Excellence is a bipartisan group of committed citizens who are charged with making recommendations to the governor and to me on ensuring quality educators in our schools, special education, early childhood, local control, and funding sources. But, the real work of transforming our school finance system, so that it supports the children of our state, will be in how each of us contributes to building the political will in our own community to support school finance reform and build local alliances among the PK-16 educators, business, community, and labor leaders. Education supports economic growth. Education prepares future citizens.

Wisconsin's high educational achievement—No. 1 on the ACT, some of the highest SAT scores, and a statewide 90.83 percent graduation rate, fourth highest in country—shows that we know what we are doing in Wisconsin. Our success is one side of the story, the asset side.

We are proud that our good schools have attracted and kept skilled people in the state because of the opportunity for their children to receive an outstanding PK-12 public education. Our good schools, often the centerpiece of the community, are key to the high quality of life that brands Wisconsin. We are proud of all of our children, but we also are responsible for all of our children.

The other side of the story is that Wisconsin spends \$855 million GPR annually in corrections. And we know that, of offenders entering adult correctional institutions, 50 percent read below the ninth-grade level, and 73 percent are below the ninth-grade level in math. These incarcerated adults were our left-behind children. Not only is closing the gap in achievement a moral imperative, but it makes the most sense economically.

Because the gap in achievement of our children is directly related to their economic disadvantage, we must develop the most efficient, effective, and fiscally sound response to children and families of poverty our state has ever seen. By reducing bureaucratic barriers and maximizing public funds among our state and community agencies, we can eliminate fragmentation of social services.

By investing in people and education, we can ensure a well-educated, high-skilled workforce as our best asset in competing for high-end jobs. Strong communities with low crime rates, good schools, and a clean environment attract talent and businesses. We must ensure that the generation currently aged birth to 25 who are living in poverty become those highly skilled citizens who have the opportunity to achieve economic security.

As your state superintendent, I have traveled from Superior to Stoughton, from Butternut to Beloit, listening, sharing, and learning from the people of Wisconsin. In those travels, I have seen firsthand how children are benefiting from school-family-community partnerships. And, I have heard firsthand that these efforts must be sustained over a long period of time if we truly want to see results.

Shared responsibility and working in true collaboration are our best hope for facing the challenges ahead of us. That is why we all came here today. The key to meeting the challenges of public education is in the partnerships we build and the commitment in all our hearts. We believe in all our children and have dedicated ourselves to their success.

With the beginning of this school year come new challenges with the federal education law. The federal government has mandated that we leave no child untested. It is now our job in Wisconsin to bring people together around our commitment to truly leave no child behind.

Make no mistake about the real commitment and knowledge of Wisconsin educators. Their experience and leadership—those who are closest to the children—is far too often not equally shared or appreciated by some who walk the halls of the State Capitol, Congress, and White House. We all want this federal law to succeed, because its goals of closing the gap and focusing resources on our neediest children are the right ones.

So, don't let anyone ever question the knowledge or commitment of the Wisconsin education community for what it takes to raise student achievement. The commitment is real, and it will not be left behind. But, it will be difficult to meet the challenges we face to improve our schools with broken promises for funding.

Schools need the resources necessary for these reforms to work, but to date, the White House and Congress have left their commitment to resources behind. But, we cannot wait, nor can we expect Washington, D.C., to act. We must not let their broken promises defeat the promise we all make to our students in the schools and classrooms of Wisconsin each and every day.

That is why I have issued a statewide community call-to-action for everyone, in every community across Wisconsin, to support our schools identified for improvement under federal law, which disproportionately serve children of poverty and are in 11 local school districts and one charter school of our state.

There are some who want to take the easy way out and label these failing schools, but they will only be failing schools if those same people decide to sit on the sidelines and choose not to be a part of the solution. Supporting the academic achievement of students in every Wisconsin public school must be our state's top priority, and we all must be part of the solution. The future of our democracy will be determined by our ability to meet this challenge.

As your state superintendent, I have worked with Governor Doyle, his administration, and the Legislature to get our state's fiscal house in order and to balance the toughest budget the state has ever seen. I fought hard for smaller class sizes and 4-year-old kindergarten and against a misguided and irresponsible \$400 million cut to our schools. I also fought to provide strong support for funding our public libraries. No matter how deep the crisis was, I believed that we had to protect what's most important. In the face of an unprecedented state budget deficit and enormous fiscal challenge for our state, we have been able to keep education Wisconsin's top priority.

The budget signed by the governor protects our investment in early childhood education by fully funding the SAGE class-size reduction program and preserving our state's commitment to the 4-year old kindergarten program. The budget also funds most state library programs at last year's levels. In fact, our popular on-line resource, BadgerLink, saw a modest increase in funding.

Unfortunately, given the magnitude of a \$3.2 billion budget deficit, both the governor and Legislature agreed that it was too difficult, in this budget, for the state to continue its two-thirds funding commitment. But, both the governor and Legislature deserve credit for increasing general school aids by \$189 million. As we all know, the impact of backing off of two-thirds funding will be significant for local school districts, and that is why I fought hard against a misguided assault or freeze on the ability of

locally elected officials to govern our schools. I believe parents, educators, and local elected school board members—the people closest to the schools—know what is best and should have the ability to decide for themselves what investment their community is going to make in their children's education.

I also supported and fought hard for the increase in the low revenue ceiling to narrow the gap between the highest- and lowest-spending districts, so children, no matter where they live in our state, have the opportunity for a quality education. I believe this will help to increase equity across the state. Every child in every community in Wisconsin has a fundamental right to a quality education.

The demographics in Wisconsin are changing dramatically, and the economic recession is usually first seen in the eyes of children in the classroom. We are seeing higher concentrations of poverty. Milwaukee's poverty level increased by 14 percent last year, and over 45 percent of Wisconsin's poor live in rural areas. Those rural and urban school districts are educating increasing numbers of students who have limited-proficiency in English.

Despite these added challenges, our statewide reading test results have continued to improve, with 81 percent of Wisconsin third-graders scoring proficient and advanced. While the reading test scores still show an achievement gap, we show gains for children of color and economically disadvantaged students. Milwaukee had its highest third-grade reading scores since our current test was initiated in 1998.

Achieving these scores is no mystery. In Wisconsin, we have some of the best educators in the country. But, we know something else about those educators. Many are at retirement age, and this puts us at a critical juncture. We must make the Wisconsin Quality Educator Initiative, PI 34, really work for local school districts in recruiting, retaining, and developing the next generation of Wisconsin educators.

The major education organizations have been working collaboratively with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) on an implementation plan for PI 34 that supports the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act requirements. This year, collaborative teams have held regional meetings around the state to share plans that allow flexibility and options for implementation of PI 34. Educators from 322 districts attended regional PI 34 workshops in the first rollout. Over the next two years, before the 2005-07 school year, when the law goes into effect, it will be essential that we all work to build the political will to support quality educators in our schools. I ask school district administrators for their continued support for this important initiative.

There are no simple answers to lifting achievement and turning around struggling schools. But we do know that poverty works against the education of our children. We know that one of the ways to help children learn is to ensure that they are properly fed. That is why we need nutrition and health programs that support a readiness to learn.

Sen. Herb Kohl has been our champion in Washington on nutrition issues, and we thank him for his efforts to increase and enhance school breakfast participation. Working through Sen. Kohl over the last three years, Wisconsin has been awarded \$2 million in federal grants, resulting in 148 public and private schools starting a breakfast program in 239 buildings feeding 98,710 students. Breakfast programs benefit students by helping lift their achievement, and breakfast programs benefit Wisconsin farmers who sell their commodities to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

We are making progress, but we still have a lot of work to do. For more than a decade, Wisconsin has ranked last in the country in the percentage of students who get a school breakfast. This is unacceptable, and it must change. Today, I will sign a proclamation to the federal government on behalf of the state of Wisconsin advocating for free meals for students whose families' incomes are below 185 percent of the federal income poverty level. This effort will not cost the state any additional funds and would increase participation in our school nutrition programs.

Not only is proper nutrition necessary for children's educational success, but as recognized by the forward-thinking educational leaders who created the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (I.D.E.A.), we must guarantee that children with special needs receive the necessary services. Under the 1975 law, funds from the federal government were to provide 40 percent of per-pupil expenditures.

To date, Congress has contributed only a fraction of the funding—as little as 6 percent in some years and never more than 18 percent. Congress has consistently fallen short on its promise. It is imperative to the future of I.D.E.A. that Congress makes good on its commitment to fund special education. We will tear our communities apart if special education and regular education become rivals for precious state and local dollars.

But, while we are waiting for Madison or Washington to act, today I am announcing the *Keeping the Promise Initiative* to put \$1.5 million of federal money in Wisconsin classrooms for direct services in educating high-cost children with special needs, including those children who are in need of nursing services and assistive technology who are not currently eligible for state reimbursement. Although this money is limited and just begins to address the issue, I have decided to reprioritize federal discretionary dollars available for statewide projects. Today, I am making funds available for classrooms serving our neediest children.

Will this solve the issue we face in Wisconsin, where special education is pitted against regular education because of revenue caps from the state and broken promises from Washington? No, but this issue is too important to ignore, and we must act now and continue to press both the state and federal governments to follow our lead and take ownership of this issue affecting every community in Wisconsin.

To keep our promise of a quality education, all of the solid investments we make in the early years must be sustained during the difficult middle school years and the transition to high school, which is where we experience the greatest dropout and truancy rates. When young people see themselves as a part of the school community and are actively engaged in their learning, they are more likely to succeed academically. Connecting the real world to the classroom through service-learning and technology is more important than ever before.

Career and technical student organizations, the arts, and athletics have long demonstrated successful results in empowering student achievement. All subject areas must demonstrate the relevance of their curriculum in developing the skills and creativity necessary for 21st century citizenship and jobs.

Never take for granted that the next generation will know how to be contributing citizens of a democracy. Public education must ensure an educated citizenry. Later at this conference, we will bring people together from around the state and the nation to focus on PK-16 service-learning and citizenship. The governor will join us tomorrow as we focus on the civic mission of public education in our democracy, which has never been more important.

The state of education in Wisconsin is strong, but our best and most important work is needed during the challenging times ahead. The stakes are high, and the time for action is now. Education for economic growth. Education for democracy.

Thank you for the commitment you make every day and for dedicating yourselves to bringing our communities together around our stories of hope, so our future will be determined by the greatness of our schools and the goodness of our children.

We have shown by our presence here today that we are committed to making this a state where we keep our promise. A New Wisconsin Promise to make this a state where hope is alive for every Wisconsin child to have a better life.

Thank you.